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FOREIGN STATESMEN AND THEIR STATECRAFT

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FOREIGN STATESMEN AND THEIR STATECRAFT

SADDAM HUSSEIN

The purpose of this paper is to apply national security strategy concepts to an analysis of the foreign security statecraft of Saddam Hussein as expressed in the events leading to and culminating in the Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The framework used for this strategic analysis will be that put forward by Terry L. Deibel (Deibel). The design presents five levels of analysis, the first being an examination of the statesman's assumptions of his domestic and international environment, the second level moving to an assessment of national interests and threats. Levels three and four apply to development of foreign policy objectives and assessment of national power and resources, respectively. The fifth stage is development of plans and priorities for accomplishing these objectives.

BACKGROUND

In the summer of 1990, Saddam Hussein found himself presiding over a country which was exhausted financially and socially, and politically isolated. Following a tragic eight-year war with Iran, a war Iraq had initiated with limited objectives¹ but which had developed into an exhaustive struggle from which disengagement was difficult, Iraq was very low on financial reserves and deeply indebted to other nations. Iraq's total foreign debt was about \$80 billion, \$10 billion of which was owed to Kuwait. In addition, the infrastructure of the country had been neglected for several years and extensive rebuilding was needed. Western estimates

¹ "[Saddam] apparently believed that a limited campaign would suffice to convince Tehran to desist from its attempts to overthrow him, and did not intend to engage in a prolonged conflict. (Freedman and Karsh 20)

placed the cost of this at \$250 billion, an amount far beyond Iraq's financial means. Given his regime's requirement for imports of food and military supplies, another \$10 billion per year was needed merely to service the deficit. Although the financial drain of the conflict was now over, replenishing Iraq's once formidable financial reserves was repeatedly thwarted by the inability of OPEC to maintain discipline over agreed-upon prices for oil.² At the root of the problem, although perhaps not appreciated by Saddam, were differences in economic philosophy. Saddam simply wanted cash as soon as possible. Kuwait, and to an extent Saudi Arabia, realized that the greater good could be realized by feeding international demand for Arab oil. This required increasing the supply of Mideast oil which, for the short term at least, lowered its price. Saddam interpreted this as open aggression.

The Iraqi army could now be demobilized, but the economy was probably too weak to absorb it. On the other hand, continued mobilization of the army without a conflict presented its own problems. In the civilian sector, the need to rebuild the country, long neglected during the Iran conflict, was straining popular support. The impact of this problem upon the country's populace was compounded by the extreme social costs of the war with Iran. Iraq had lost much of a generation in that conflict.

Despite Iraq's willingness to conduct a fight from which its neighbors would benefit (i.e., combating the spread of Shiite insurrection within their borders), aid was not forthcoming. Although Iran had capitulated at the end of the conflict, relations were still hostile between the two states. He could expect no help from his long-time foe, Haffaz Assad of Syria (Scioline 34). Saddam was convinced that an attack on Iraq from Israel was

² The impact of a one dollar change in the price of a barrel of OPEC oil was estimated to affect the Iraqi economy by \$1 billion per year. Thus a modest increase in oil prices could have gone far in solving Iraq's financial crisis. Yet, prices set by OPEC were often undercut by other members, usually Kuwait (Freedman and Karsh 46).

inevitable Following the 1981 attack on Iraq's developing nuclear reactor, he decided that the development of nuclear weapons in Iraq would never be a proposition acceptable to Israel And then there was Kuwait In addition to economic transgressions, Saddam believed Kuwait actually to be stealing oil from Iraq by "slant drilling" into Iraqi territory from the Ramaila oil wells

If these were desperate times for Iraq, they must have seemed doubly so for its leader Many considered Saddam Hussein to be paranoid and it is true that he exhibited behaviors of one preoccupied with threats to his personal survival His fears were justified,³ however; in the last two years there had been three attempts on his life One may speculate whether Saddam worried how soon, given the present state of affairs, could he expect another such attempt

SADDAM'S ASSUMPTIONS

Without strong action on his part, there was no reason to believe that Iraq's plight would improve Indeed, there was great likelihood of serious national decline Kuwait would continue to steal oil and fail to support price levels of oil that Iraq so desperately needed

Saddam realized that a new world order was in the offing with the decline of the Soviet Union What shape this would take was uncertain Lacking the need to combat Soviet attempts at political gain, the US might choose to narrow its focus from foreign to national issues On the other hand, with the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc, the way could be open for creation of a new US-Israeli political order (Freedman and Karsh 30-1) Each of these conditions argued for the need for quick action on the part of Iraq

³ One observer stated it clearly "If [Saddam] now thinks, as is widely assumed, that people all around him are trying to kill him, that may be because, for much of his adult life, people all around him have been trying to kill him " (Gray 36)

And what would the reaction of the West be to a military movement by Iraq? During eight years of war with Iran, there had been no outside intervention. During this century, Western powers had exhibited a consistent pattern of ignoring the acquisition of territory by force, even when their own legitimate interests in the region were at stake. As for the invocation of international law and the sanctity of treaties, those are Western concepts, the validity of which was not acknowledged by Arab states⁴

Regarding the US resolve to fight, Saddam had only to look at America's Vietnam experience. He was confident that America lacked the political will to sustain a fight in which large casualties were incurred. In a 25 July meeting with the US ambassador in Baghdad, Saddam observed that the Americans lacked Iraq's readiness to lose 10,000 men in a day's combat (Freedman and Karsh 52)

Saddam probably felt that focusing Iraq's problems on a neighboring state would help solidify his leadership and deflect personal blame for the state of the economy. Should the West become involved in an Iraq-Kuwait conflict, Saddam would gain stature as an Arab brave enough to stand up against a superpower. Perhaps Saddam had also assumed that the Iraqi population and military would be willing to rally and fight in another war. In hindsight, this seemed more plausible for the civilians than for the military.

These last two assumptions may have been inadvertently reinforced by comments from the American Ambassador on 25 July. Glaspie was summoned to the Ministry in Baghdad

⁴ The West failed to intervene in Nasser's attempt to conquer Yemen from 1962-7 and against Saudi Arabia which was built upon the conquest of Jabal Shammar. The West has ignored the taking of oil from neighboring states by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (from Abu Dhabi) and remained impassive during the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company which was nationalized in 1951 and of the Suez Canal, five years later (Kelly, J B and Crozier, Brian 30-4). More recent examples of the failure of the US to intercede in international conflicts were those of Turkey and Cyprus, China and Tibet, and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan (Freedman and Karsh 59)

without the advantage of contacting Washington for guidance. At the meeting, Saddam expressed his furor against the United States, threatening terrorist retaliation if the US were to maintain its position of hostility against Iraq. Glaspie responded that she had "direct instruction from the President to seek better relations with Iraq." Later, she conceded that in her "own estimate, your aims [of ensuring that Kuwait did not cheat on its quota] should receive strong support from your brother Arabs" (Freedman and Karsh 54-5).

NATIONAL INTERESTS AND THREATS

First and foremost, Iraq needed economic security. This is not to suggest a reversal of the subordination of economic security to national survival found in most national interest taxonomies. For Iraq, economic security *was* national survival, that is, without a change in its economic health, Iraq would simply not survive. So, in the first instance, economic security and national survival were merged. Iraq needed to repay its foreign debts, rebuild the country's infrastructure, and modernize the military. All of this required increased revenue from oil. In this connection, the greatest danger for Saddam was that his creditors would unite to arrange a global rescheduling package which would involve a degree of international surveillance of his economy (Freedman and Karsh 38).

Modernization was not limited to conventional weapons. Saddam also wanted advanced weapons technology for Iraq. The second condition of national survival, in Saddam's eyes, was to protect Iraq from Israel. Saddam had no intention of moving away from developing weapons of mass destruction, and he was certain that Israel would continue to oppose that, probably by violent means as they had in 1981. Acquisition of weapons to build Iraq's military strength and perhaps the capability to massively retaliate from an attack, were therefore in the national interest of Iraq.

Saddam was also aware of domestic order as a national interest. Although not expressed directly, his concern for rebuilding Iraqi infrastructure must have been at least partially directed to this issue. His public pronouncements were also an expression of concern for this aspect of national interest. The largest threat to domestic order was, once again, Iraq's dire economic plight.

FOREIGN POLICY OBJECTIVES

In the most general terms, Saddam Hussein wanted to exert control over oil resources in the Middle East. Subordinate to this overarching objective was obtaining higher international oil prices, perhaps through affecting the world oil supply. Another objective was access to ports and loading berths, either from gulf islands or from Kuwait. Saddam initially requested these from his gulf partners but was rebuffed.

One cannot study Saddam without a sense that his foreign policy objectives included a strong personal component. His political stature was the direct result of a personal history of violent and ruthless pursuit of personal power. It is difficult to imagine that Saddam would subordinate these objectives to the welfare of his country.

POWER AND RESOURCES

The list of Iraq's power and resources is not very long. Iraq's natural and economic resources lay in its enormous supply of oil. Iraq's military power lay in the size of its military force. It had a million-man army and the third largest armored force in the world, a force which Saddam claimed to be seasoned from the war with Iran. Overall, it was the largest Middle Eastern military might after Syria and Egypt. Over the years, Iraq had procured a large inventory of military hardware, including T-72 tanks, MIG fighters, anti-aircraft and communication systems from the Soviets, and SCUD missiles. For some years, Iraq had been

actively engaged in a program to develop weapons of mass destruction. It had an extensive program for the development of chemical and biological weapons which he had on occasion used against Iran and the Kurds. Combined with delivery systems such as the SCUD, Iraq was capable of striking targets as far away as Riyadh, Tehran and Jerusalem (Freedman and Karsh xxii)

Saddam also considered himself to be a major asset as a powerful and charismatic political leader in the Middle East. He also thought himself to be a master military strategist despite his complete lack of training in that profession. This was a view which those serving him did not always share, a fact which precipitated dissension among his military officers.

PLANS AND PRIORITIES

Iraq had attempted to obtain its objectives from Kuwait through noncombatant (if not belligerent) means: negotiations to raise oil prices; the lease of islands for ports and loading berths, and the request of \$10 billion in payment for oil obtained in the Rumaila field.

Kuwait's failure to appease Saddam confirmed its fate. By adding Kuwait's fabulous wealth to the depleted Iraqi treasury, Saddam hoped to slash Iraq's foreign debt and launch the ambitious reconstruction programmes he had promised his people in the wake of the war with Iran. Given Iraq's historic claim to Kuwait, its occupation could lift Saddam's national prestige by portraying him as the liberator of usurped Iraqi lands. Last but not least, the capture of Kuwait could make Iraq the leading power in the Arab world and give it a decisive say in the world oil market. In short, in one stroke his position would be permanently secured (Freedman and Karsh 62).

On July 24, 1990, Iraq deployed tens of thousands of troops to the Kuwaiti border. At 2 A.M., on August 2, Iraq invaded the country and announced its annexation six days later.

CONCLUSIONS

Saddam's plan was a failure. Almost all Arab states in the region joined a coalition of forces to oppose Iraq. Counter to his expectations, this coalition did indeed react and it reacted with overwhelming force. With the US taking the military lead, the Iraqi Army was defeated and Kuwaiti sovereignty restored. Iraqi infrastructure was reduced to almost primitive conditions. Iraq has since been subjected to a continuing economic boycott and, until recently, has been unable to sell oil.

One of Saddam's largest mistakes was his interpretation of the meaning of the end of the cold war. Saddam saw the period as pre-New World Order and concluded it to be a time of normlessness in the rules governing behavior among nations. To the US and its allies, and quite possibly other states in the region, it was a time to reassert the rules of international conduct. The Iraqi invasion was therefore an event which could not be countenanced.

This is not to say that Hussein was totally oblivious to strategic issues. Although he did not expect the opposing coalition to form, once it did take shape, he understood its fragility. His attempts to bring Israel into the conflict were a reflection of this. Only through the exercise of extraordinary diplomacy was the break up of the coalition averted. There remains the question, however, of Saddam's restraint in his missile attacks on Israel. Subsequent revelations have made it clear that Iraq was capable of placing chemical or biological warheads on the SCUDs striking Israeli soil. It has been speculated that he feared retaliation by nuclear weapons, and this may be true. Another interpretation is that Saddam's focus remained on his personal survival. Even in defeat, he had personally prevailed. The use of chemical or biological weapons may have so damaged his image in the world that his future as a national leader would have been forever lost.

We now turn to the question of whether steps could have been taken by other nations to avert Saddam's invasion. The conditions leading to Iraq's desperate invasion were not unknown to the US. This was not a failure of US intelligence. Indeed, April Glaspie told Saddam Hussein that the US fully understood Iraq's dire need for funds. For reasons which were not entirely clear, the US did not provide Saddam Hussein with an alternative that he viewed as viable. Motivations for leaving this problem with Saddam may lie in America's wishes for his political failure. Saddam Hussein had of late shown himself to be a violent and erratic leader. Perhaps it was hoped that his inability to solve his country's problems would result in removal, which happens in democracies. In a country with no historical, cultural or constitutional provision for the orderly succession of political leaders, this hope may have not been well founded.

Saddam Hussein did have one accomplishment. Once again, he had survived. If his small country could be defeated by a coalition of the world's most powerful nations, he could not be. He had boldly taken on most of the world and had individually prevailed.

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